

# A fauna survey of the Sydney Olympics: the media profile and its symbolic significance

Some zoologists spent their time avoiding the Olympics, but most, along with 3.8 billion people around the world, watched the spectacular Sydney Olympic games and were enthralled by the dazzling opening and closing ceremonies. A huge number of Australians went to the venues or watched the events on TV. One can still hear the patriotic chant: "Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, oi, oi, oi". Some of the symbolism of the games was overt and contemporary, such as the reconciliation issue, the succession of female former Olympians in the relay leading to the torch lighting ceremony, and several Aussie animals on display as mascots. However, the Olympic pageant included a much longer list of faunal emblems. This editorial survey constructs the Olympic faunal list then capitalizes on the jingoistic chant by converting it into one aimed at achieving a Gold Medal in the race to conserve our faunal biodiversity. This will require an Olympian effort, including a willingness on the part of most Australians to see the magnitude of the environmental problems and consider new options for the future. The Sydney Olympics has shown that great ambitions such as this are possible.

"I'd like to think that the Olympic experience *has* in fact given us a springboard to change this country forever," playwright David Williamson wrote in his piece "Patriot Games" for the souvenir edition of *The Australian Magazine* on 7-8 October 2000. He continued: "I'd like to think that the opening ceremony's spineless jellyfish is a thing of the past. And that the giant barracuda with the razorsharp teeth, a symbol perhaps of the way we tend to react with reflex ferociousness at any hint of criticism from abroad, is a thing of the past."

Australia has been changed forever by the successful staging of the games, including the paralympics attracting full stands. However, it is yet to be tested whether Australians have the leadership necessary to conserve our biodiversity. Thus while it was encouraging to read in the *Countryman* on 21 September 2000 under the headline of "Extinction warning" that Federal Environment Minister Robert Hill had announced \$490,000 for community grants "to help preserve endangered species in their local environments", it was depressing for zoologists to learn in the same article that funding for scientific programs was to

be reduced. The zoologists who write for this and other journals contribute to conservation as much as any other sector of society by providing the scientific underpinning for community action. To reduce funding for scientific research is ultimately to weaken the effort of the community groups and is contrary to the inclusiveness of the Olympic spirit. Community groups are vital in any national program of ecological restoration and management, but so are the scientists who work on critical elements of the same endeavour.

"Faster, higher, smarter: Olympian effort still needed" was the headline in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 3 October 2000 in a piece contributed by Brian Anderson, President of the Australian Academy of Science, and nine other leaders of science, industry and education. The opening section of the article read: "If Australia is to keep its place among the world's prosperous nations, greater investment must be poured into research and development." Just as in sport, where we have always known that we cannot rely on greater numbers to compete successfully at the highest level, our efforts as innovators and educators must remain above average if we are to compete against the bigger players". The piece concludes with a return to the Olympic image: "With the right policy framework and encouragement from government, Australian industry, research and higher education can help deliver the gold-medal performance needed to deliver greater prosperity".

Those who are keen to conserve Australia's zoological heritage understand that there is an urgent need to seek new solutions to conserve our unique faunal heritage. To keep our zoological treasure house we must ensure less degradation and loss of habitats on private and government lands, less pollution and less soil erosion. We must strive for ecologically sustainable management within production landscapes and place less reliance on industrial practices and products that degrade native landscapes. We also need more national parks and nature reserves, a more rigorous survey and study of our fauna, and more investment in new ideas for linking wealth to the conservation of biodiversity. These grand ideas need mascots, so why not employ the Aussie fauna to help with the task? Let's now survey the fauna of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games!

In the prelude to the games, three official Olympic animals were constantly on display – the echidna, kookaburra and platypus. Although they were anthropomorphic caricatures, they were immediately recognizable. However, the opening ceremony began with an introduced species, the horse, in large numbers. They were the only live animals consciously to appear in the games, and were included, somewhat ironically, to remind Australians and the world of our bush heritage. It was a moving display of skill that breathed life into the man from Snowy River image. In the "Nature" section of the opening ceremony there were magnificent Aboriginal scenes of native fauna, such as the platypus and turtle, that took their place alongside the native flowers. During one section of the opening ceremony, a black column of darkness provided a believable water medium to display some brilliant marine creatures – sea horse, lionfish, nudibranch 'Spanish dancers' and box jellyfish, while in the closing ceremony golfer Greg Norman rode a white shark. Several days before the closing ceremony, the white shark appeared in another context when foreign visitors as well as Australians read Sian Powell's piece in *The Australian* (29 September), titled "Give our sharks a chance. There is no logic to killing white pointers".

Powell's article drew attention to the draft recovery plan for the Great White Shark which was released for public comment in June. She stated that: "Listing more than 50 scientific texts and papers in the bibliography, the draft plan canvasses various ways the slump [in shark numbers] can be countered". Presumably Greg Norman earned the label of "white shark" because it was fatal to tangle with him, or because he was ferocious in attack and to be greatly feared, and not because he was an endangered species. Unlike Greg Norman, this shark is on the hit list of those who would happily kill it off because, if Powell has reported it accurately, it causes roughly one fatality per year. We do know that this average would need to include the two people taken during the Olympic Games! *Jaws* author Peter Benchley, who was recently in Australia promoting the conservation of sharks, freely admitted that *Jaws* had done much damage to the image of all sharks. If the Great White Shark is to be conserved it will need the combined efforts of scientists, relevant government departments, the recovery plan writers, both state and federal governments and newspaper columnists. How dismal it would have been if the great creature Greg Norman had ridden at the Olympics carried the label endangered or threatened.

The *Daily Telegraph* of 25 September 2000 carried an article entitled: "Thin edge of the wedge for Fatso". It reported that "Fatso the Fat-arsed Wombat, the unofficial mascot of the Australian athletes, has been banned by the Australian Olympic committee". The article noted that "The wombat has earned cult status among Australia's swimmers and has even made it to the podium with Michael Klim and Grant Hackett". However, Fatso's inclusion in team photographs and on a commemorative postage stamp apparently infuriated the AOC (Australian Olympic Committee) because the wombat was overshadowing its official Boxing Kangaroo soft toy. For those who did not sit up late each night watching "The Dream" during the games, the article explains: "Fatso, the creation of Channel 7's irreverent late-night Olympic talk show hosted by Roy and HG, had even become more prominent than SOCOG's official mascots, Millie, Olly and Syd". For those of us with silver hair, the wombat of our youth was "muddle-headed". Fat-arsed is just a contemporary disparaging remark, and well within Roy and HG's range of mockery. Is the insult good for wombats? Our answer is yes, the publicity is positive since Australians are well known for unmerciful remarks, even though polite foreign visitors may have had great difficulty understanding the humour that Roy and HG are famous for.

In the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 19 September 2000, James Woodford gave us a superb headline in: "Olympic dream yields another gem: a secret, enchanted forest". The item continued: "Wedge between the glow of the flame burning in the Olympic cauldron and the Parramatta River is the State's newest national park – a pristine remnant of tall forest where sea eagles nest on ancient trees still marked by Aboriginal carvings. On the edge of the park, the contrast between wild and modern Sydney could not be more stark, with the newly-gazetted Silverwater Nature Reserve so close to the Olympics that announcements can be clearly heard from the nearby Games venue". The piece concludes with an explanation of why the land still exists: "The Environment Minister, Mr Debus said: 'The military presence has protected this unique piece of land from the encroachments of one of the most urban areas of Sydney'." The connection between the Olympics, wildlife and conserving habitat is well made. This should help conserve other such precious remnants of rare pre-European landscapes.

This connection between survival and habitat reached Olympian proportions with the Green and Golden Bell frog. The *Daily Telegraph* on 29

September 2000, under the headline "Hopping out to say g'day", reports: "The frogs responsible for the moving of the Olympic tennis centre took in some of the Olympic action yesterday, appearing before journalists at the main press centre. The frogs live in Sydney's Brick Pit area, the initial site for the Games tennis, famous also as the location for the 1983 movie *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*. The Green and Golden Bell Frog is native to Australia. But a population that once ran to millions is now down to 10,000 of which 1500 live at the Olympic site. The program to save the frog won Australia's biggest environmental award". The pages of the *Australian Zoologist* have added a considerable scientific underpinning for the conservation of this frog species. The image of this Olympic frog grows larger than life, and indeed, a big model of it greeted visitors at the airport. Our other fauna grows in stature with it.

Under the headline 'Seal goes for gold', the *Coffs Harbour Advocate* (20 September 2000) reported that: "A sports-loving fur seal from Coffs Harbour has gatecrashed the Sydney Olympics, arriving at Bondi on Saturday for the first round of the beach volleyball competition". Four days later, Bronwen Gora wrote an article in the *Sunday Telegraph* on 24 September 2000 under the headline "Native fauna fears". She reported that: "Magpies, snakes and lizards presented unexpected challenges at yesterday's Olympic mountain biking event at Fairfield in Sydney's west ... Competitors training during the week also encountered goannas and snakes, including the poisonous eastern brown snake and the red bellied black snake ... Spectators were issued with sheets yesterday advising them what do if they saw a snake or were confronted by a swooping magpie".

Both these articles reported the sensational, the large and the dangerous, as can be expected, but the surprise animal that had the greatest potential impact on the events at the games was much smaller — the bogong moth. As Simon Benson wrote in the *Daily Telegraph* on 25 September 2000 under the heading "Modern science takes on the humble bogong": "Olympic organisers yesterday admitted they had not considered the annual bogong migration now plaguing Olympic Park ... The track was covered yesterday morning in dead moths which had to be vacuumed off ... The moths have blocked air conditioners and set off alarms ... Sydney 2000 was forced to reassure athletes that the moths were completely harmless ... Winner of the 100m final Marion Jones said her race was made more difficult by the moths ... Finals tonight — including Cathy Freeman's 400 m — may be affected". Benson's piece tackled the

scientific side as well as the spectacular: "CSIRO head entomologist Dr Rob Floyd said that for thousands of years, the Aborigines of south-east Australia would come together annually to celebrate and feast during the bogong festival. 'Isn't it great they have turned up for the Olympics?' he said". The piece continued: "Dr Floyd and Dr Ted Edwards drafted advice ... to turn the lights off." The scientists advised that: "If they are there at dawn they will find crevices and stay there and if there are a lot of moths around the next night they will be immediately attracted to those huge lights." Dr Floyd was "happy they have taken this approach. It is the greenest response they could have come up with. It would be pointless using pesticide. The only other alternative would be to replace every light globe with yellow or sodium vapour bulbs which would not attract them as much as the blue mercury vapour globes". As one can see, it is serious stuff. Zoologists are in demand and love it, especially when it is a case involving a newsworthy invertebrate!

The zaniest item was in the *Daily Telegraph* on 20 September 2000 under the banner headline "Sydney 2000". Next to the photos of Chelsea Clinton was a small item under the heading "Wild Sydney". Accompanied by a photo, the brief text stated: "The Brown Antechinus, a small Sydney mammal, turns the skins of its bird and mice prey inside out while feeding. The male antechinus has sex once, then explodes and dies". Although some journalistic licence was taken in describing the mating behaviour of the antechinus (they mate over a period of about a fortnight, then all the males die), it was sufficiently correct to make a good story in this location. One interpretation is that the antechinus is the zoological counterpart of President Clinton, whose fierce political skills can turn the opposition inside out, but whose career exploded after a sexual encounter.

During the TV coverage of the games on Channel 7, a commercial station, the ad for Cascade beer showed the trademark green bottle with a Tasmanian Tiger etched on it. The image was animated to attract attention. One of the two men in the conversation voiceover says, "There is none left you know," and the other replies: "What, have they run out of beer?" "No," says the first, "there are no Tasmanian tigers left". To any zoologist this exchange is a parody of the loss of the Thylacine. One can see that the matter is well deserving of serious treatment after reading Bob Paddle's (2000) new treatise: *The Last Tasmanian Tiger*. The conservation of species is a major issue for many zoologists and is not a laughing matter. However,

one needs to stand back and see the joke through other eyes. Lonely Planet journalist David Willett saw the meaning straightaway. In a discussion with one of us (DL), he pointed out that there is nothing more serious for an Australian male than running out of beer. To equate the extinction of the Tasmanian tiger with such a human tragedy is to elevate the matter of species extinction to one of great human importance. We'll drink to that explanation! Let's also hope that the millions who watched Channel 7 during the Olympics also saw that running out of Thylacines was on a par with the horror of running out of beer.

"Token madness" was the apt title of the headline piece in the Metropolitan lift-out section of the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 23 September 2000. Nick Leys entered the bizarre world of the souvenir trade during the height of the Olympics and offered a list of his findings: "Key rings made from kangaroo poo, snowdomes, patriotic but dumb T-shirts, bath mats, wooden clocks, lighters, backpacks, stuffed native fauna bearing no resemblance to any creature found here". Lest the reader should be tempted to snicker, Leys reminds us of our own fascination for trophies: "Bear in mind next time you smirk at a rabble of Americans or Koreans jostling for clip-on koalas or plywood boomerangs – in another country that would be you". The strangest part of this piece was under the subheading "Best souvenir". The item, with a photo of a koala dressed in leather and steel, was: "Koala Boy Sex Slave (\$45)." Leys commented: "Everything about Sydney in one souvenir: passion, pain, longing, fur, self-deprecating humour." This koala seemed to have been a feral specimen, but since it was on display in Sydney's major metropolitan newspaper it is included here in this Olympic fauna survey.

The koala did of course put on an Olympic performance. One of the giant Visa Sydney 2000 Olympic games advertisements portrayed a koala on the Roman rings, one of the components of the men's gymnastics. It was an engaging full-face shot with the koala looking squarely at the camera. It was the very model of an Olympic mascot. This giant card was seen all over the place, and also featured in newspapers, such as the half page ad in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 28 September 2000.

At the closing ceremony there was a large frilled-necked lizard, and giant prawns on bikes. There was also a kangaroo on a bike, and a man standing next to it. The kangaroos on bikes at the Atlanta Olympics were considered to have presented a poor image of Australia, and were definitely on the banned list for the Sydney games. So, to see one in the wings on the night of the closing ceremony

caused a stir. The in-joke was that the man next to the kangaroo on the bike was Ric Birch, the artistic director of the opening and closing ceremonies. Of course he had no intention of bringing it out on parade. The significance of the image in this context is that the cultural impact of our fauna is a matter of major international importance. One can be sure that each image was carefully considered, its relevance to Australia weighed up, and its place in the overall scheme of presenting Australia to the world as well as the rest of Australia was taken into account. The cultural representation of our fauna is thus of great consequence, and plays an important public role in determining its chances of community and government support and thus its survival.

Fauna surveys serve a vital role in zoology. They are often overlooked as being too simple and too descriptive to deserve a full place in scientific publications. How many zoologists would love to be able to draw on a full fauna survey commenced in 1788, with comprehensive notes on abundance, habitat selection and food preferences. By 2000 we can only do what is possible with what is left. Considerable thought and skill is now required for the design and interpretation of surveys because of the complexity introduced by environmental changes and their impact on animal populations.

This editorial team enjoyed conducting a fauna survey of the Sydney Olympics 2000. It showed that even Australian cultural events need zoologists on staff at the outset. A page on Australia's fauna in the official guide would have been great publicity for our fauna, especially if the Olympic animals as mascots were used to introduce other, less well-known, Australian species. The task now facing us is to convert our survey into a gold medal performance in the race to conserve and restore our rich faunal heritage. Do not let the impaired vision of others determine your writing speed. Write up your research and surveys, add a conservation conclusion and submit it to the *Australian Zoologist*, or anywhere, but do not let your work and your ideas languish. The race is against time, and personal bests are called for. The effort behind every submitted paper is appreciated, as is the effort to get to the starting line in any Olympic event. Move your manuscript to the starting line. This is one way the *Australian Zoologist* can promote an Olympic effort to identify, record and conserve our zoological inheritance.

**Paddle, R.** 2000. *The last Tasmanian Tiger. The history and extinction of the Thylacine*. Cambridge University Press, Oakleigh, Victoria

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